

# THE SKIN OF NOSTALGIA: A Reflection on the Artifice of Postcards, Structuralist Filmmaking, and Home Movies.

By

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## ABSTRACT

Widespread representations of nostalgia in popular culture are infamously sentimental, sometimes trite, and often mundane. Feelings of nostalgia are often as benign as they are malevolent: a balm for the troubled soul, a poisonous dependence on the old ways, a reprieve from the drab pallor of day-to-day life, and most commonly a harmless escape to a time when things seemed better. I will argue that nostalgia is more than the passive preservation and restoration of the past; nostalgia, is a (positive) re-possession of the past through the continuous rehearsal of the familiar – the past is essentially structured by the present, with how and what is remembered, and how and what is forgotten. The picture postcard and the amateur film are examples of a certain kind of 20<sup>th</sup> century aesthetic toward “exoticism” and “authenticism,” the retrieval of the peripheral, and the redemption of the ephemeral. Nostalgia is characteristically ambivalent. It is the classical and often more personal version of a wistful remembrance of by-gone days has given way to a post-modern version of rapidly consumable nostalgias. This essay, however is concerned with the more the personal version of nostalgia, and is a reflection on my artistic practice as method for interrogating the senses of longing and loss, which infuse the present.

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## FOREWORD

This essay is the conceptual and theoretical rationale for a study of nostalgia, a reflection on the artifice of postcards, structuralist filmmaking, and home movies. My interest in nostalgia and techniques of self-making stems from my experience that one's first environment, the environment of the self, is the most important environment; a philosophical position that draws on Husserlian phenomenology. It is also the point whereby a nurturing collective environment can emerge. Nostalgia is all pervasive as many scholars have noted. David Lowenthal for example has referred to the past as ultimately "omnipresent." My interest in the past is related to both the personal and public acts of looking inward, which I see as a reflexive method of interrogating what has been lost either through replacement or reiteration.

"Life as the confrontation of the **I** and its environment (*form*) a dynamic dialogue between the individual and the world." (José Ortega y Gasset, 1949, p. 147)

The nostalgic postcards and video essays in my portfolio represent a personal chronicle of habits, processes, routes, perhaps even symptoms of a particular disposition toward the experience of rupture, loss, displacement, and the remaking of self. I believe nostalgia to be an organic response to the experience of temporal change, biological decay, material degradation, and is rooted in fear of our own

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mortality. It is both a defense from and an idealization of reality. It is an idealization because nostalgia involves the establishment of the “extra-ordinary” through the promotion of falsehoods – and herein lays the risk – we become interminably entangled in the moribund contemplation of the vestiges of decline and their consequences. But perhaps, nostalgia is more an act of rescue than a curse, and this need to gaze upon the traces of “life as it is” (old Coca-Cola bottles, antique doll houses, long-playing records) is a method of considering the ephemerality of existence by engaging only with certain of its benign (idealized) features, the nuances of age, as opposed-to its material totality, “we transform fatality into continuity” (Boym, 2001, p.42) – we opt for an “Athens minus the slavery” (Scanlan, 2004, p.3).

The records we make, our texts, photos, and songs are acts of ‘resorption’ through which we encounter our corporeal and spiritual selves, they are narratives that inscribe our so-called environment with beauty, pleasure, empowerment, belonging, righteousness, justification and direction. They are also the tendential markers of a search for self-knowledge, meaning, celebration, and redemption.

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### Navigating the website

To be consistent with my argument that nostalgia is a quest for self-knowledge, and to expand the modes through which academic research can be presented, I have repurposed my portfolio as a website ([www.etannales.com](http://www.etannales.com)), a frame that mirrors contemporary habits of information dissemination, reception, and retrieval. Additionally, the format of a website encourages interactivity, discovery, and agency for the visitor. The title and the image on the home page function as metaphors, transitions to other sensorial perceptions that require investigation – we must look below the skin's surface to access the intentionality of the metaphor.

The portfolio elements are assembled as part of the website from where it is possible to navigate from essay, to postcards, and to the films. The central image on the home page is of a placemat. A closer look reveals that the placemat is made from human skin.

The viewer/reader can navigate the site in a number of ways. The preferred mode of engagement with the site is not linear or teleological. I challenge the primacy of sequential progress through the digitized environment of the Internet, which is essentially *atemporal*. For example, the nostalgia postcards and the films may be viewed as stand-alone works, as studies of nostalgia, or as integrated components of a greater whole.

[www.etannales.com](http://www.etannales.com) <http://www.etannales.com>



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Figure 001. Home Page.



By moving the cursor onto the main body of the skin various website elements are revealed. These include the title, the essay itself, the postcards and their rationale, the films and their rationale, and the rationale for the website. The order in which these elements are accessed is left to the preference of the individual website visitor.

Figure 002. Home Page. (with title)

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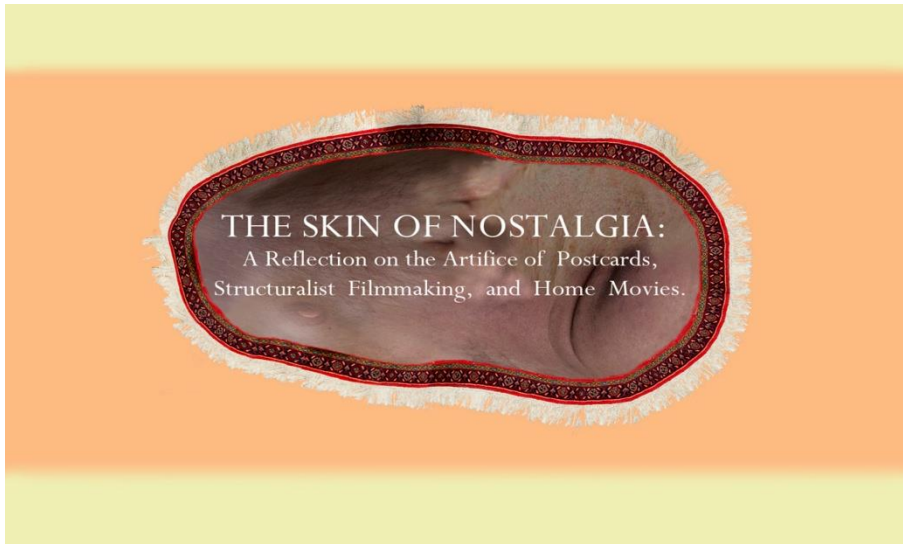
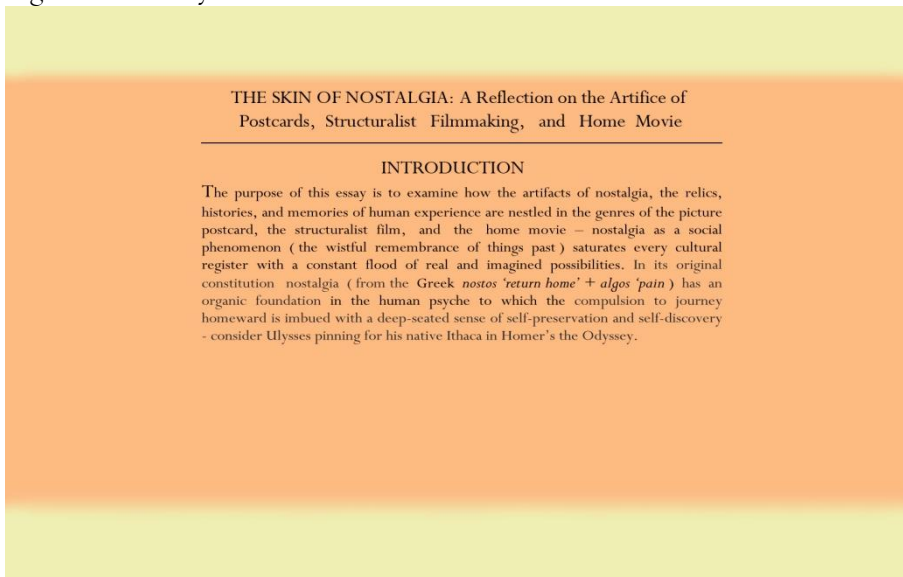


Figure 003. Essay.



For example, locating the essay from the nostalgia skin (Home Page) with the cursor launches a new screen with the essay.

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## ELEMENTS OF THE WEBSITE

The essay: *THE SKIN OF NOSTALGIA: A Reflection on the Artifice of Postcards, Structuralist Filmmaking, and Home Movies* - Here I argue that nostalgia has an organic foundation in the human psyche to which the compulsion to journey homeward is imbued with a deep-seated sense of self-preservation and self-discovery.

The postcards: NOSTALGIA POSTCARDS RENDERING THE VANISHING

PRESENT- The postcards address the repertoire of canonical metaphors that comprise the modernist imaginary: fashion, architecture, individualism, nature, conformity, knowledge, progress and the city that emerged at the time of the postcard's ascendancy, and are still in circulation today.

\* The series consists of eight postcards.

The films: THE CINEMA OF NOSTALGIA- Here I examine the origins and differences between the commercial film and the non-commercial film, the relationship between avant-garde and the amateur film, and how the nostalgia for other periods has shaped the aesthetics of these genres.

\* The videos are accessed through a Vimeo link to the site.

*The Indices of Time* (31:18 mins.)

*NOSTALGIA: MOTHER AND FATHER FROM ANOTHER TIME*

PART ONE (5:56 mins.) PART TWO (6:59 mins.) PART THREE (9:56 mins.)

PART FOUR (8:33 mins.)

The rationale/background for the website: [www.etAnnales.com](http://www.etAnnales.com)

Here I discuss the conceptual basis for the website along with the choice of title, a re-appropriation of the practice of making annals and chronicles as alternate forms of narrativity.

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this essay is to examine how the artifacts of nostalgia, the memories, histories, and relics of human experience are nestled in the genres of the picture postcard, the structuralist film, and the home movie. Nostalgia as a social phenomenon (the wistful remembrance of things past) saturates every cultural register with a constant flood of real and imagined possibilities. The philological origins of the word are Greek; from the Greek *nostos* 'return home' + *algos* 'pain.' In literature, nostalgia is often idealized as a sense of returning home. The compulsion to journey homeward is imbued with a deep-seated sense of self-making and self-discovery - consider Ulysses pining for his native Ithaca in Homer's the Odyssey as an example of the home word journey in nostalgic literature.

This essay interrogates the nostalgic quest, which is a deeply felt social and psychological state inscribed with ineluctable longings for the familiar and the known. The nostalgic quest for a lost home may not always be for a fixed and attainable home, but rather may reflect an attachment to a simple memory or a range of feelings that flow from the recollection of distant places, peoples, and times. For myself, the loss of home was experienced as a series of ruptures. Each one left its own indelible mark of loss. However, it was the separation from my first childhood

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home that carried with it the greatest imprint of loss. Until I was five and a half, my life was idyllic, I lived happily in a world surrounded by a large family, in a house complete with its own gardens, orchards, and live stock; my paternal grandmother lived in a house at the other end of the yard. All that ended in 1957 when we were forced to escape Yugoslavia because my father had got himself into a jam with the (communist) government. Landing in Italy with just the clothes on our backs, we joined an immense wave of humanity who were also fleeing from the place of their birth to search for new homes in other lands. Over-night we became prisoners, homeless outcasts, living in refugee camps, monitored, shunned, impoverished, passive and dispossessed we wallowed in what seemed like an indeterminable length of time. I knew then that my sense of home would forever be marred by the ordeal of loss, and that I was doomed, in a sense, to wander ever homeless from then on.

The state of longing for home has had other names including: homesickness, melancholia, and malaise. In certain epochs in fact they were ascribed to demonic possession, or as in the case of melancholia (from Ancient Greek μέλας (*melas*), "dark, black", and χολή (*kholé*), "bile"-OED) to an excess of bile. Over time the meaning of all words takes on different associations and nuances, coloured by varying social dynamics. Nostalgia is no different. Its movement from denoting a specialized

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medical condition to its generalized contemporary usage as a catch all term for anything vaguely belonging to some other time, exemplifies the cultural drift that has become emblematic of the modern era.

### Section One

#### Nostalgia Texts

My interest in nostalgia is related to the metaphoric “home”; the home that is elsewhere, or no more, but exists in the memories, histories, and relics of the past. I am looking at the various ways nostalgia is used as mnemonic device for the structured retrieval of the by-gone days. In my research on the theme of nostalgia Raymond Williams, Fred Davis, David Lowenthal, and Svetlana Boym were some of the key authors who have extensively influenced my understanding of nostalgia’s varied typology. I will briefly discuss how the contributions of these authors have shaped the study of nostalgia in general and more specifically my own project.

I will begin with Raymond Williams, and his seminal book *The Country and the City*. Published in 1973 it is less about nostalgia *per se*, and more about a much deeper set of conflicts and considerations. The first of these is the transition in Britain, from a largely rural way of life to that of the “first predominantly urban dwelling people in

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the long history of human settlements” (Williams, 1973, p.2). This transition was underpinned by the changes brought on by the Industrial Revolution, the prevalence of agrarian capitalism, and British imperialism. The second conflict is the relationship between language (in particular English literature) and ideology, and how meaning is collected and distributed across generations, practices, and institutions. Born in a small village in the Welsh border country (he later went on to teach at Cambridge), Williams’ personal aesthetic and political affiliation were framed by a deep connection to the land and an equally deep understanding of the prevailing structures of the world. In *The Country and the City*, Williams focuses on the dialectic between “the past as history” and “the past as memory.” This dualism signifies the cleavage set between what has been written and what has been felt. The determination of significance and the rendition of truth as brought about by the monumental forces that transformed England through Agrarian Capitalism, as Williams argues:

“The true history of the English countryside has been centred throughout in the problems of property in the land, and in the consequent social and working relationships. By the eighteenth century, nearly half of the cultivated land was owned by some five thousand families. As a central form of this predominance, four hundred families, in a population of some seven or eight million people, owned nearly a quarter of the cultivated land. Beneath this domination, there was no longer, in any classical sense, a peasantry, but an increasingly regular structure of tenant farmers and wage labourers: the social relationships that we can



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properly call those of agrarian capitalism. The regulation of production was increasingly in terms of an organized market” (Williams, 1973, p. 60 ).

Raymond Williams’ lament may be characterized as a critique of the “ideology of improvement.” It centres on a reading of the canon of English literature, from Austen to Wordsworth (including foreign language authors such as Balzac, Tolstoy, and R. K. Narayan), the texts ranges from Petrarch, to Virgil, and Tom Jones, the purpose of which is to search for the beginnings (of ):

“The powerful feelings that have gathered ... on the country ... the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue. (and) On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation. A contrast between country and city, as fundamental ways of life, reaches back into classical times” (Williams, 1973, p. 1).

Williams uses the analogy of an escalator to describe how he moves backwards through the layers of time to establish, wherever possible, the origins of certain principal myths that have surround the conceptualization of the country and the city. One such myth is that of the Golden Age, which may be traced to “the Christian idea of the Garden of Eden ...(and that) of a magically self-yielding nature, and more explicitly in Virgil” (Williams, 1973, p. 42).

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“no peasants subdued that fields; it was not lawful even to assign or divide the ground with landmarks: men sought the common gain, and the earth itself bore everything more generously at no one’s bidding” (as cited in Williams, 1973, p. 42 *Georgics*, I).

The idealization of rural virtue is not limited in its appeal to only the workers of the field. Others may also find a bounty in the land, a bounty that can be calculated, bought and sold, developed into mills, stone pits, and factories of industrial production. This contrast between the landed gentry and the landless peasantry is predicated on the existence of ideologies of power: rural exploitation is sublimated through the apparatus of the law courts, centers of commerce, the institutions of state control, and the blatant expenditures of the city.

Williams’ primary motive in making this argument, and throughout the text, is to illustrate how the rhetorical structures of the nostalgic narrative (the Golden Age, the Garden of Eden, the Pastoral, the Bucolic) are nestled in the poetry, literature, and journals of specific epochs. They participate in conjuring up and delivering associated meanings that both exalt and exacerbate the dialectic between “the past as history” and “the past as memory.” Put another way, “the past as history” locates identity as a set of institutional conditions linked to a framework of unifying principles whereas, “the past as memory” is almost always associated with the

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personal, emotional, and subjective. The former rehearses the collective actions made legitimate through institutions; the latter is what an individual can remember throughout their own lifetime. History can be remade, memories may only be reviewed. For example, “the past as history” could involve recollecting : I was born in 1951 in what was then Yugoslavia, and because of the communist government’s totalitarian ideology my family was forced to flee. Conjuring “the past as memory,” might resemble this: as I child, I remembered only the happy days of playing in the yard surrounded by my immediate family. “The true history of the English countryside has been centred throughout in the problems of property in land, and in the consequent social and working relationships” (Williams, 1973, p. 60), this is the central argument in the historical discourse of power inherent all social relations that leaves one group dominated by another.

In *YEARNING FOR YESTERDAY: A Sociology of Nostalgia*, Fred Davis sums up nostalgia as being: “a deeply social emotion ... (concerned with) the remembrances of persons and places of our past in an effort to bestow meaning upon persons and places of our present” (Davis, 1979, p. vii). In Davis’s sociology of nostalgia there is a movement between what he sees as a phenomenological nostalgic impulse and a

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constructed quantifiable reality based on the observable dynamics and consequences of group behaviours. According to Davis, nostalgia assumes its position as signifier of all things home-like: the country where one was born, a particular house (the family home), a home away from home, and memories of family and friends recollected by a family photo album or perhaps a home movie. The list seems as endless as are the congeries of real and virtual references.

In a sense, the term nostalgia is semantically vague (first it was a medical condition then a social affect), wherein its thing-ness may be conceived of as a ghost-like haunting ambiguously rooted in the experience of the ever present now. At a very basic experiential level, Davis offers this interpretation, “nostalgic experience (is seen) as essentially a normal psychological reaction triggered by fear of actual or impending change” (Davis, 1979, p. 10). Thus nostalgia is never about the putative attributes of, say ‘home,’ but is more indicative of one’s present association with past experience.

Additionally, Fred Davis observes that certain historical or temporal transitions, such as the life-cycle, represent ruptures with pre-existing modes of stability, ushering in new orders of behaviour that the individual may not be prepared to adapt to. These fissures become the breeding ground for the nostalgic impulse. However the ability

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to look back in time may in fact prove to be therapeutic: the present and the past are engaged in an active discourse to dispel or disavow the entrenchment of an unpleasant and unfulfilled now. Nostalgic reverie invokes specially structured memories whose active ingredients suffuse the threatened present with the requisite aura of stability, peace, joy, and fulfillment. Any traces of pain, sorrow, and disappointment are filtered through what Davis has referred to as an “it-was-all-for-the-best” attitude or, “patronized under some ‘*great human comedy*’ metaphor” (Davis, 1979, p. 14).

To summarize, both Raymond Williams and Fred Davis trace the scope of existential triggers (lapses, discontinuities, transitions) as grounds for nostalgia’s retrieval of past events. Williams, whose inquiry centres on the search for evidence of what he believes to have been a diabolical deception, which is the total sublimation of an ancient way of life by another, more ambitious, order. He feels that the old way has been undone (torn asunder), and for which there is good reason to pine, and to pity, and to ask how did this take place? On the other hand, Davis also draws attention to nostalgia and the politics of the state; images of the pristine wilderness and the great out doors are heavily imbedded in the American conservative ideology of a “good life.” Equally complicated is the progressive liberal agenda, tinged as it is with its own

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version of the “good life.” The liberal agenda posits an ideal in which the “bucolic” and the “pastoral” are centrally planned and corporately managed. “Conserving tendency” or “predilection for turbulence,” this is the “politics of nostalgia” that Davis would alert us to.

“The past is essential - and inescapable. The past is everywhere ... it suffuses human experience ... the past is omnipresent. Without it we would lack any identity, nothing would be familiar, and the present would make no sense. Yet the past is also a weight burden that cripples innovation and forecloses the future” (Lowenthal, 1985, p. xv).

In his book, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, David Lowenthal analyzes three broad themes: wanting the past, knowing the past, and changing the past. I believe his analysis of the past through our relationship to memory, history, and relics is ultimately more useful. According to Lowenthal, memory is constituted by what we remember, history is the interpretation of memory, and relics are the tangible features of both natural processes and human artifacts. Knowledge of the present is essentially informed through the experiences from the past: we recognize objects, events, and people because of prior encounters that date back to childhood, but also through the link to traditions that span millennia and draw in every act of “perception and creation, pervading not only artifacts and culture but the very cells of our bodies” (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 185).

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It is a common refrain to frame our lot in life as irreconcilable. Such fatalism is often associated with all too painful reminders of time's relentless passage, and of the complicated and endless battle to expunge and obliterate the sometimes widespread dread that accompanies images of the past, synonymous as it has become with decay, degradation, sickness, venality, and death. In a quote by V.S. Naipal, we are confronted by this most profound and visceral fear: "We have to learn to trample on the past ... the past can only cause pain" (as cited in Lowenthal, 1985, p. 67). The past may not only be the scene of personal tragedies. It may also be associated with the unwanted chronicles and histories that do not conform to dominant political regimes. Helen Keller's *The Frost King*, which challenged 19<sup>th</sup> century stereotypes of women, or Alfred C. Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, which exposed the general public to sexual behaviours that were previously taboo subjects, were both works which created controversy and censure from mainstream institutions. The great Library of Alexandria with its vast store of ancient knowledge must have caused a great deal of consternation to those wishing to conquer Egypt given that it was sacked three times. In our own time Nazis Germany's "Action against the Un-German Spirit" book burning campaign serves to establish the interdiction that the old ways must be destroyed to make way for the new.

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The veneration of the old, the relics of history, is easily neutralized by sequestering them to the realm of memorialization: the museum, the archive, the monument, the antique shop. Our own sense of time and space is inescapably fraught with ambivalence; on the one hand we are prone to idealizing the past through myth and ritual, while on the other hand this perpetuation of external features reveals how much we are still dependent on tradition. And in a final argument on the burdens of the past, two things are worth noting. The first concerns the notion of “generational succession” - the natural order of the world is underpinned by the concept of “continual revision.” And the second, scrutinizes Sigmund Freud’s psychology, which is by and large animated by the concept of memory retrieval. Freud claims that our psyche is preserved in the form of impressions, which are then restored mnemonically to memory.

The past, observes Lowenthal, before the appearance of the word nostalgia, was reflected in the “antiquarian attitude,” or by an “archaistic fervour” for medievalism, jousting knights, or Virgil’s Arcadian evocation of pastoral splendor, or the romanticism of Wordsworth, whose ballads praised and lamented the (lost) childhood of by-gone days. Nostalgia, in the truest sense, arrives with modernity; nostalgia arrives with the other anomalies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. These include



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the *flâneur*, the pickpocket, the prostitute, the gambler. Such new cultural figures (stereotypes) signal the rupture with the previous social order and the ascendance of new modes of thought.

I will now turn my attention to Svetlana Boym. In her text, *The Future of Nostalgia*, she reveals perhaps the most contemporary rendition of nostalgia's varied forms (writing as she does from the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century), and provides a uniquely female (though not necessarily feminist) perspective. Being Russian, Boym's orientation is decidedly Eastern European, a geographic region that has thus far not been a part of the discourse of the previous authors Williams, Davis, and Lowenthal. Eastern Europe is a particularly interesting site for tracking nostalgia. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, a great void was created. A whole way of life that had been unfolding from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had disappeared. In its place emerged a new system. It was to be a better, brighter one, based on the principals of democracy and freedom. These virtues were thought by many to have been absent from the old communist system. Displacement, ruptures, and the estrangement from the familiar, are conditions ripe for nostalgia, and become fundamental to Boym's analysis, which is, that in principle there are two types of nostalgia, restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia.

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Svetlana Boym characterizes restorative nostalgia as being concerned with rebuilding the lost home and patching up the gaps in memory, whereas reflective nostalgia is about “longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance” (Boym, 2001, p. 49). Nostalgia, according to Boym, is never about absolutes. It is tendential, concerned with the shape and meaning of impulses, the relationship between the individual/personal and the collective/public acts of remembrance. Restorative nostalgia seeks to maintain the memory of the lost home through retrofitting a newer more perfect version of home onto the old lost or deficient home. This category of nostalgic persons, “do not think of themselves as nostalgic, they believe that their project is about truth” (Boym, 2001, p. 49). In light of the significant changes that have occurred globally around the legacies of past epochs, in particular the rise in the demand for the preservation of national heritage sites, restorative nostalgia is directly implicated in the resurrection of nationalistic symbols, memorialization, and myth making. New nationalisms rely on re-shaping the collective identity by deploying revivalist strategies that skew the argument in terms of a single epic battle between good and evil. Boym notes that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, nostalgia responded to increased secularization and the rapid pace of industrial change by the “transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning” (Boym, 2001, p. 42), which up until that time was in the metaphysical domain of religion. In this sense restorative

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nostalgia occurs in opposition to tradition, home is no longer the home of one's own personal memories, but the projection of an ideal collective home, a "rational delusion" driven by "the anxiety about those who draw attention to historical incongruities between past and present and thus who would question the wholeness and continuity of the restored tradition" (Boym, 2001, p. 45).

Put another way, I would like to propose that restorative nostalgia could be characterized by the introduction of three overlapping qualities which define a semantic transition from one assemblage of meanings to another. To illustrate this transition I have combined the terms dogma, transgression, and ideology (as elaborated in the Encyclopedia Britannica) into a sequential formula that delineates the order of movement from one term to the next.

1) *dogma*, the institution of an established belief or principal, through doctrine or system of doctrines, 2) *transgression*, the passing from order to disorder, of social repression and limitation, and 3) *ideology*, a form of social or political philosophy in which practical elements are as prominent as theoretical ones. It is a system of ideas that aspires both to explain the world and to change it, for instance socialism, communism, anarchism, fascism, nationalism, liberalism, feminism, environmentalism, terrorism, and globalization are commonly recognizable ideologies. ([www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com))

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My use of the terms *dogma* and *transgression* may draw on some religious associations normally attached to *dogma* and *transgression*, but my application is not religious in that narrow sense of these words. Rather I wish to establish a connection to the deeper psychic motivations that underpin human behaviour and spirituality for which other expressions do not suffice. At this deeper level restorative nostalgia is a dialectic that ends with the inversion of truth (the installation of ideology through a breach with previously held fundamental beliefs), the “transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning” (Boym, 2001, p. 42).

In the second mode of nostalgia, which Svetlana Boym identifies as reflective nostalgia, her objective is to trace the space where collective memory meets with national memory. Let collective memory stand for “common landmarks of every day life ... (which constitute) shared social frameworks of individual recollection, (while) national memory, tends to make a single teleological plot out of shared everyday collections” (Boym, 2001, p. 53). Thus when the historical catastrophes that normally attend the loss of home are at their most acute, collective memory installs “safeguards in the stream of modernity (to) mediate between the present and the past, between self and other...” (Boym, 2001, p. 53). From which these new narratives and identities are recovered.

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Nostalgia as a social framework shares some contiguous features with the notion of collective memory. At some level each is concerned with erasure as the act of forgetting: unconscious, willful, or coerced, omissions of one kind or another are part and parcel of the ways in which events in the past are either displaced or forgotten. Paul Connerton posits that forgetting is as important as remembering. Forgetting may not always represent failure. In some cases may be seen as a success, leading to the establishment of enhanced social bonds. For example, in situations where civil wars have prevailed, the warring parties may elect to explicitly construct an interdiction stating that henceforth all crimes committed during the hostilities will be forgotten. In the seven types of forgetting identified by Connerton, *prescriptive forgetting* becomes necessary and desirable:

“to re-establish the legitimacy of the state in societies where authority, and the very bases of civil behaviour, had been obliterated by totalitarian government: the overwhelming desire was to forget the recent past” (Connerton, 2011, p. 36).

Connerton describes other key examples where traditional thinking regarding the importance of remembering is being challenged, in particular the notion of *annulment* (his third kind of forgetting), interrogates humanity’s compulsion to collect, and to store, in the face of living “in a throwaway society ... where memory is archival ... (and we have) a surfeit of information” (Connerton, 2011, p. 38).

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Central to Connerton's argument is that, as a technologically driven society (with a surfeit of information), we may have to rethink our relationship to production. In the future it may become more important to systematically discard portions of what we know so that we do not become the victims of our own surfeit.

Connerton's theories on the importance of forgetting encourage us to reflect anew upon the human failings of omission and recognize not only their social composition, but also their organic foundation in the formulation of the psychic and spiritual dimensions of the human behaviour. When Boym meditates on the merits and limitations of restorative and reflective nostalgia, she is echoing more or less what Lowenthal, Davis, Williams, and Connerton have all asserted: that the past is essentially structured by the present, with how and what is remembered, and how and what is forgotten. The rhetoric of nostalgia attempts to establish continuity amid the threats of discontinuity, separation, absence, and loss by replenishing the past with stability, value, and meaning.

Having covered the main theses developed by Williams, Davis, Lowenthal, and Boym I will now move to summarize these concepts with the idea of re-integrating them into the idea of nostalgia as method and to serve as an analytical framework for examining the final sections on the nostalgia postcards and the cinema of nostalgia.

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### Summary

The above authors represent only a small fraction of the vast body of literature that now covers the subject of nostalgia. The particular Anglo / European perspective on the part of these authors unfortunately excludes the diversity of other nostalgic discourses that permeate the landscape of China, India, Japan, the Middle East, Latin America, and nostalgic discourse from a feminist perspective. In many non-Western countries nostalgia has a decidedly negative political connotation. It is associated with the effects of colonialism and regional nationalism these conflicts are used by political parties to rally domestic and international support over territorial disputes and readings of historical events – the Turkish massacre of the Armenians, the Rape of Nanking etc. After politics, consumerism is also a prominent driver of nostalgic narratives. For example recent trends in Japanese consumer behaviour indicate a passion for Southeast Asian textiles and handmade items; the glossed narratives inscribe these objects with the requisite aura of “‘warmth’ (nukumori), ‘calmness’ (yasuragi), ‘simplicity’ (soboku-sa), and ‘nostalgia’ (natsukashisa)” (Nakatani, 2003, para. 4). A feminist reading of nostalgia would ask the reader to re-consider whether the traditionally male view of nostalgia contains a desire for a return the maternal figure. Teresa M. Brown for example, in her 1989 PhD dissertation *Rewriting the Nostalgic Story: Woman, Desire, Narrative*, argues for an alternative perspective:

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“that the traditional story of nostalgia may be alienating to [a] woman who has historically remained, physically as well as psychically, in the home, and it argues that certain contemporary women writers are critiquing and rewriting the nostalgic story. This simple nostalgic plot is complicated by the impossibility of return, which is figured as a metaphoric castration, a fact which raises the issue of gender and nostalgia” (Brown, 1989, p. 3).

Williams and Davis for their part have developed some of the key analytical contributions on the subject of nostalgia. Williams’ excavation of English literature for example traces the long history of settlements on the land, and of the conflict between the country and city, which, for Williams (as a life-long Marxist) is the struggle for power between those who must work the land for their survival and those who would exploit it for their profit. *The Country and the City* chronicles the struggle for the home (the place of one’s birth), and the pain and suffering that follow from its loss. For Williams the dislocation from the home is re-interpreted through the lens of the more fundamental tensions of class struggle.

Fred Davis picks up where Williams left off; where Williams tracked a socio-political conflict writ like a Homeric tragedy, Davis, a sociologist, argues that nostalgia acts as a central force in the process of identity maintenance through the passages from adolescence, adulthood, and aging. For Davis nostalgia is restorative and therapeutic. For Williams the answer lies in the quest for home found in the poems, novels, and



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journals that make up the canon of English literature, in whose fragmentary disclosures political outrage is so blatantly articulated. This is an example of the rupture he hopes to capture:

A way of life that has come down to us from the days of Virgil has suddenly ended.

( *and* )

A whole culture that preserved its continuity from the earliest times had now received it quietus. (Williams, 1973, p. 2)

Lowenthal's rendering of nostalgia is deeply influenced by his historian-geographer background for example, territorial metaphors abound:

"The instrumentally remembered past is a conventionalized and barren landscaper. In the shapeless plain of time, bleak calendric pinnacles, the sole survivors of former rich environments preempt our attention" (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 128).

For Lowenthal the past is omnipresent. It has pragmatic benefits and burdens which may be apprehended through a matrix of routes: memory, history, and relics. He seeks to distinguish not only how we can understand the inherently paradoxical nature of these nostalgic landscapes, but also how we can respond to them. He argues, "Merely to know about the past is not enough, what is needed (to install belief) is the sense of intimacy" (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 187). Lowenthal's analysis confronts the deeply psychological and sociological contradictions between the

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individual past and the collective past.

Svetlana Boym's focus on the ideas of a restorative nostalgia and a reflective nostalgia, seem better suited to an examination of more recent events, such as the legacy of cold war politics, and the break-up of the USSR. Restorative nostalgia is oriented toward the reconstruction and maintenance of the "original image" of the lost past, while reflective nostalgia settles for the "irrevocability of the past and human finitude" (Boym, 2001, p. 41). In the end, Boym's main argument concerns the future of nostalgia, configured in the longing for a lost homeland and childhood that now exist only in the creative landscapes of the mind.

So far, I have argued that there are various ways of understanding the longing for the past which infuses the present. Scholars have explained this longing as a quest to integrate identity, a means for repeating and repairing painful losses from the past, or as a way of investigating the traces of loss that underlie our present sense of anomie. In the next section I will discuss the nostalgia present in my own work as a visual artist. I have been showing work since 1978 and so in a sense this portfolio is infused by a kind of nostalgia for the early days of my art practice seen through the lens of the contemporary moment. In my exploration of nostalgia as a method, I discuss some of the reparative impulses toward self-making identified by Husserl

amongst others. Turning to the contents of the portfolio, I briefly explore each as an example of the ways in which genre in general and genre in my work plays out against the ideas presented by some of the scholars discussed in my previous section.

## Section Two

### Nostalgia as Method

Since the 15th century notions of the self (whether enslaved, liberated, or idealized) have proliferated. Philosophers have formulated complex theories regarding the nature of the Individual. Since the purpose of this essay is to define the constitution of nostalgia as a method of personal reflection and sense making, I would like to begin with what I feel are the historical roots of the self as a generalized concept of “self-revelation” and then move on to describe how the “techniques of the self” are both concentrated and diffused within the spectrum of a nostalgic discourse. In particular I will be looking at how the matrix of memory, history, and relics engulfs the present and future in the dialectic of its own credibility.

In the history of Western thought the sense of one’s self is alternately interpreted and maintained by the arts of self concern and self-discovery, which until the eighteenth

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century were part of religious culture, but migrated to the private domain of leisure through “the spread of print literacy and the growth of a commercial book trade” (Hunter, 2005, p. 318). Through techniques of teaching within the mass school system of the nineteenth century an aesthetic of self-questioning and self-revelation – the reading and writing of the self became formalized across a spectrum of cultural series (forms of signification, cultural practices). These included museums, schools, hospitals, asylums, armies, and factories.

Historically there are ways off speaking about the relationship between what is known as “natural man” and “the philosopher.” This is a one sided relationship as it is only the philosopher who has the privilege to speak. By developing new words and terms, establish the clearest truths and most sophisticated thoughts one may reach a place where natural man “no longer recognizes where he stood” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 3).

Harvard psychologist Jerome Bruner suggests the path to self-knowledge does not necessarily have to follow “the form of thought that goes into the constructing of logical or inductive arguments but rather of stories and narratives,” and he goes on to say that “we seem to have no other way of describing “*lived time*” save in the form of a narrative” (Bruner, 1987, p. 12). The narrative form of the self-knowledge is the

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autobiography, which contains the selected events of a life: the person's memories and history, the montage of images and emotions, "the juxtaposed fragments from widely dispersed places and times" (Ulmer, 1989 as cited by Denzin, 2008, p.118). In this sense of presenting a life story one is as much involved in invention as representing a historical object dislodged from its contextual settings.

A biographically meaningful event, re-animated through the performative re-telling of a person's life, becomes the subject matter for what Denzin has called "interpretive research," or "interpretive biography," or autoethnography. To put "self-telling" in the wider paradigm of every day life, the act of painting, or witnessing a sunrise, or reading a book, can be seen as "ways of worldmaking." According to Nelson Goodman (*Ways of Worldmaking*), the appreciation of the phenomenal is a matter of perception:

(which) " ... is itself notoriously influenced by interpretations provided by habit, culture, and theory. We see toothbrushes and vacuum tubes *as* toothbrushes and vacuum tubes, not as arrangements of color patches" (Putman, 1979, p. 603).

The phenomenon-structured nature of every day life is shaped by "cognitive and linguistic processes... that guide self narratives, organize memory, and purpose-build the "events of a life" (Bruner, 1987, p. 15).

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The philosophical framework of nostalgia as a method, draws upon two schools of thought that are traditionally conceived of as being mutually opposed to one another: structuralism and phenomenology. These are essentially two approaches that differ wildly in their conceptualization of subjectivity, the former negates the “subject” within relational systemics, while the latter privileges its fundamental primacy. Respecting the conventional wisdom that structuralism is anti-phenomenological, in my work I attempt to find the points of contact and the gaps between the two. For example, since the human condition may be perceived to center on the principal of dualities, with a general philosophical tendency is toward either an apodictic form of reasoning (the logical certainty of a proposition), or an assertoric form of reasoning (the possibility of something being true). It is rare that the two polar extremes of, say, “meaning” and “experience” coalesced happily. Not-with-standing the prevalence of these schisms, Edmund Husserl has argued that the duality of finite substances (objective / subjective) may be resolved through a contemplation of: “certain ways by which, within his (man’s) own pure inwardness, an object outwardness can be deuced” (Husserl, 1960, p.3).

In the following section I will explore through the medium of the film and the postcard, the play between the “introspective” and the “extrospective” tendency, the

points of contact and the gaps that form between these two polarities. Is all human activity but a striving toward social equalization / obedience (fitting in) and individual differentiation (standing out) as Georg Simmel has observed? Or are human behaviours more complex, more nuanced, spread out across the whole spectrum from fitting in to standing out?

### Section Three

#### Nostalgia Postcards: Rendering the Vanishing Present

The series of eight post-cards chronicling the assemblage and erasure of human and non-human structures interrogates the now mostly marginalized genre of the picture postcards. I say marginalized, because the postcard no longer enjoys the prominent role it once occupied as *agent par excellence* of a certain kind of aesthetic pleasure. It has become supplanted by social media's text messaging and twitter. I am interested in examining certain cultural themes, the repertoire of canonical metaphors that comprise the modernist imaginary: fashion, architecture, individualism, nature, and the city that emerged at the time of the postcard's ascendancy "beginning in 1895 and 1900, and fading out by 1915 and 1920" (Rogan, 2005, p. 1) – and are still in potent circulation today.

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One could claim that I am nostalgic for nostalgia, for the forms that remind us of some other time or place, or ways of doing things that have disappeared. There is a kind of obdurate self-indulgence that coalesces from pursuing activities that are in essence now obsolete. At the forefront of these endeavours, stamp collecting and the building of model railways are the most well known; and then very recently, the emergence of a cadre of first generation video and computer game aficionados who are now enjoying new found recognition for their steadfast love of the pre-historic behemoths of yester year. Remember Magnavox Odyssey, Atari Pong, Commodore 64, Nintendo 64, and Pac-man? They are coming back.

My own personal interest in the outmoded, forgotten, and the hardly used anymore, begins with a concern for the ever-vanishing present, which is a lament for the inevitable loss, or downgrading that occurs when a thing is no longer '*au courant*,' and is relegated to the demiworld of the useless and no longer of much interest. And yet, it is precisely at this moment of transfiguration when one aesthetic is exchanged for another. Here the nostalgic finds his/her true inspiration – the provocation for reverie – the contemplation of some detail that rests at the intersection of extinction and exultation, and has become entangled in the aestheticization of decay.



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The eight postcards in my collection adhere to classical postcard conventions as well as deliberately break with standard protocols of production, representation, and consumption. Originally conceived as a response to Sigmund Freud's (1919) seminal essay, *The Uncanny*, these postcards rehearse the central points of his thesis, which is that human beings feel strangely uneasy about themselves. We are not at home "*Heimlich*," and that the repression of this unresolvedness results in its repetition, the "*Return of the Repressed*," the unhomely, "*Unheimlich*," the uncanny, the very strangeness of ourselves to ourselves. It is this simultaneous puncture and breakdown at the border of reality, the moment where we can no longer separate what is ours from what is foreign, that Freud sought to articulate. And yet, Freud's psychology was ever rooted in the body and the soul, he would have us locate our 'rootless' 'homelessness' in a longing for the mother (our first home), and recognize that our houses (architecture as the built human environment) are nothing more than attempts to redress this fundamental rupture (the absolute negation: the expulsion from the mother). In rejecting this analysis, what are we left with, how else do we explain our eternal unsettledness? The experience of haunting and obsession that Freud talks has also been discussed by Avery F. Gordon in *Ghostly Matters*, where she advances a more sociological perspective. She sees haunting not as an example of the

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occult but as a social phenomenon that performs “an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely” (Gordon, 2008, p. xvi). She proposes that the term haunting refers to moments where something suddenly reminds us that the trouble we thought had been resolved is clearly still around. Haunting is a term that “describes those singular, yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when you lose your bearing on the world, lose direction, when what’s over and done with comes alive and what’s been in your blind spot comes into view” (Gordon, 2008, p. xvi).

Conceptually, the postcards embrace the notion of “*reportage*,” the chronicling of the exotic, the intellectual, and the quotidian. They stem from the “particular motivations and desires that are associated with social formations and associated ideological discourses that dominate a specific historical context” (Markwick, 2001, p.422). The nostalgic postcards serve the double function of being an ephemeral and comic diversion, and as a subversive memento of the tendency toward intellectualism. In this multiform capacity the postcards deliberately problematize the use of language and image. They are deliberately difficult or awkward to read, while offering visual pastiches that stand in opposition to conventional norms – you could call them postcards for bored intellectuals, or boring postcards for intellectuals. In a

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sense they seek to force the issue of nostalgia from passive nostalgic reverie to active nostalgic critique.



Explaining the mysteries of the human condition has always been bound up with foreboding, take for instance our sense of reality, the personal space we inhabit, it is steeped in an aura of "anonymity" and "indifference." Hence we are both victim and offender in "*unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest (we) become the more repellent...*" (Engels on the English working-class 1845). Since the monumental ruptures with historical time and space, we have stood in the spectral shadow of a force at once putatively strange, and ineluctably familiar (the competition between the fundamental dualities, individualization and conformity). According to German sociologist Georg Simmel (1858-1918), the conditions for the emergence of the tendency toward imitation; intrinsically linked to the birth of fashion: in that all human activity is but a striving "*towards social equalization with the desire for individual differentiation and change.*" To put this another way, when I say to you: "*Regardes la, elle est la jeune femme avec le sac a dos de couler,*" what am I saying? Is there something "*distingue*" that I wish to draw your attention to? Yes, there is an abundance of the strangely ineluctable, familiar, and unfamiliar observations nestled within this pastiche of modern urbanity, and chief among these is the concept of "obedience" (*fitting in*) and "differentiation" (*standing out*).



Keeping an Eye On-it  
Dimitrije Martinovic

Responding to the human condition,  
visual culture, and every day life.

Figure 004.

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For instance in Figure 004, the postcard features a teenage girl, pony-tail, knapsack, t-shirt, handbag, cell phone, cavernous urban background; anything but the typical postcard motif – no sea-side idyll, no bucolic hill-sides covered in vineyards, no picturesque old towns. This postcard is more akin to a study in visual anthropology, ethnology, or sociology. The text does not offer any respite, no touristry entrapments here, no tasty Bonbons to entice one's wanderlust. It just presents Friedrich Engels and Georg Simmel and their apocalyptic rants on isolation. What sort of nostalgia is this? Perhaps the girl with the knapsack is a reference to rootlessness and the never-ending search for home, the nostalgia we carry with us everywhere.

In the end, the nostalgia postcards are deliberately ambiguous and paradoxical, they want to charm and entertain, while trying to challenge and provoke. They diverge from the traditional visual motifs that were so popular during the golden age of postcards. Such motifs centred on capturing "*the wonders of the world that mankind has wrought,*" by presenting images and texts that ask the viewer to question the contingency of modernist and postmodernist frames (universality, certainty, progress, univocity of meaning), and our relationship to the past, present, and future. The nostalgic postcards serve as a device to track the nostalgic quest, a bittersweet memento of the awkwardness of never really being at home, and as a

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philosophical suggestion that at the core our search for our ‘*home*’ is the eternal search for our lost and homeless “*selves*.”

In "Nostalgia Postcards" I picked up on Lowenthal's idea of artifact as a route to the intimacies of the past. In the following section on my autobiographical films I translate the ideas of structuralist filmmaking and elegiac film into an exploration of narrative and memory.

### Section Four

#### The Cinema of Nostalgia

When examining the two films in my portfolio, the *The Indices of Time* and *NOSTALGIA: MOTHER AND FATHER FROM ANOTHER TIME*, some questions that emerge include their place in the wider context of cinema as a cultural “paradigm.” For instance, “what are the various forms of signification making up this paradigm” (Gaudreault and Marion, 2012, p. 10)? There are the cinemas where screenings take place, and the cinemas of different regions India, China, Latin America, Africa, America, France, Italy, Germany, Japan, and so on. As well, and perhaps most

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importantly, there is the division between commercial film defined by the Hollywood feature length film and the non-commercial film, defined by the amateur film and home movie, the documentary and industrial film, and finally the art film defined by the (ephemeral) inquiry into “life as it is.”

My films, *The Indices of Time* and *NOSTALGIA: MOTHER AND FATHER FROM ANOTHER TIME*, belong to the category of non-commercial film. The home movie is nestled in the framework of the amateur film, the documentary and the art film belong to the realms of social inquiry and personal reflection. *The Indices of Time* chronicles the conditions of mourning and loss in, while *NOSTALGIA: MOTHER AND FATHER FROM ANOTHER TIME* canvases the constitution of personal memory, collective history, and the mimetic value of relics as triggers for nostalgic reverie.

At the structural level, I was interested in examining the extent to which nostalgic associations are part of the processes of filmmaking? What are the underlying aesthetic and philosophical conditions that determine the given discourse of a particular work, and how do these observable social, cultural, and historical references get resolved in the final outcome? For example, in the run-up to each project, I was very conscious that I immediately began to reminisce about the films I

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loved the most. These included films from the golden ages of cinema, *Un Chien Andalou*, *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*, *Battleship Potemkin*, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, *Scorpio Rising*, *Wavelength*, and many more too numerous to mention here. It was a kind of an epiphany; a grand arc of associations completed. My dilemma on how to locate my nostalgia within a recognizable cinematic framework could be resolved through the nostalgic appropriation of existing and familiar cinematic forms.

The high water mark of the art film was the experimental film of the post second war era, the structuralist films of the avant-garde cinema of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. It was also the period when the death knell of the avant-garde sounded and when home movie begins to disappear. These changes at one level are the result of technological advances, in particular the advent of smaller format video equipment, and the increased distribution of film via videocassette. These ultimately changed the viewing habits of consumers. It is worth noting that cultural change is invariably commensurate with technological change, and the forces that rise to them: one-innovation ushers in a particular shift in social attitudes, beliefs, or behaviours, another may spell its demise. For example, one could argue that modernity proper arrives with the first visible trace of its existence. The first permanent photograph taken by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce in the mid 1820s, and that nostalgia is

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commensurate with the development of photography. And furthermore, photography destroyed the world of miniature portraiture: “by 1840 most of the innumerable miniaturists had already become professional photographers, at first only as a sideline, but before long exclusively” (Benjamin, 1931, 2008, p. 281).

Even as avant-garde cinema and the home movie have receded into the past, and their virtues become unclear, we may turn to the past for guidance and enrichment. “If it (the past) cannot tell us what we should do it tells us what we might do; if it provides no specific precedents it still prefigures the present ... if it is no longer a model it remains a guide” (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 47). The re-possession of the past rehearses the continuance of the familiar; the present finds its validation in the milestones of the past. Rummaging through the detritus of the past for pearls or diamonds that may have been overlooked in the wake of abandonment is a common practice. More accurately, it is often the defining feature of a new approach. For structuralist filmmakers like Hollis Frampton, the cinematic form had the primary function of interrogating the modernist assumptions of time, space, and movement; “the very material of and properties peculiar to film ... ” and with “the overthrow of realism and linearity” (Singer, 1976, p. 11).



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At the time in 1929 when Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí were working on *Un Chien Andalou*, they were guided by two of the founding tenants of avant-gardism, the aversion to the public (sic *le petite bourgeoisies*) and tradition. These were formed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a reaction to the “psychological sentimentality and aesthetic idealism” (Poggioli, 1968, p. 48) of romanticism. Their solution, the tactic of “negation” – re-possession in reverse. The script they determined would be:

A “violent reaction against what in those days was called ‘avant-garde,’ which was aimed exclusively at artistic sensibility and the audience’s reason. Our only rule was very simple: No idea or image that might lend itself to a rational explanation of any kind would be accepted. We had to open all doors to the irrational and keep only those images that surprised us, without trying to explain why” (Buñuel in Koller, 2001, p. 2).

This is one of the principal convictions of the avant-garde claims Renato Poggioli in his critical work, *The Theory of the Avant Garde*. The avant-garde’s rhetoric of “down with the past” was a call to activism, to the idea that something new, something truer, something more noble could be fashioned from the old. It was an ideology conceived on the notion that the past could be made right in the present. The “utopian” ideal of a world made right, is one of the avant-garde’s most romantic assertions, but one that was steadfastly denied in favour of its more adversarial cosmology: “antagonism and nihilism, agonism and futurism, antitraditionalism and

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modernism, obscurity and unpopularity, dehumanization and iconoclasm, voluntarism and cerebralism, abstract and pure art” (Poggiloi, 1968, p. 226).

These views of Poggiloi are predominantly focused on interrogating the legitimacy of avant-gardism’s grandiose claims to the originality of their project, which he locates as emerging from a set of antecedents inherited from the romantics. Poggiloi claims that these entanglements may stretch back to the *baroque* and even to the renaissance. I include Poggiloi’s analysis here to support my claim that re-possession is a nostalgic concept of personal and collective historical significance nestled in the framework of temporal retrieval. Re-possession participates in the relay of personal choices we make that define our character – the favourite song, sports team, food, or hobby. And collectively, this could apply to the way social, cultural, and political constructions become attached to cultural formations, such as the avant-garde, in the form of theory, ideology, and practice. Lowenthal says nostalgia is a route to the past in which: “All present awareness is grounded on past perceptions and acts” (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 185).

American avant-garde filmmaker and theorist Hollis Frampton in 1976 lamented the then current state of filmmaking, and its overwhelming influence by the Soviet cinema’s “culture of montage.” His concern and dilemma, he explains was to reclaim

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some lost trace of cinematic authenticity apparent in the early single-shot films of the Lumières, an “imperviousness” to analysis as he puts it. A virtue, which Frampton found absent in the culture of montage where analysis seemed to “proceed during the extended moment of watching the films” (Frampton, 1971, p.110). Like the avant-gardes that preceded him, Frampton was compelled to search among the ruins of the past to retrieve, or re-possess, the vestiges of past glories to validate his actions in the present. Frampton, and other structuralist filmmakers, in some cases, chose not to use “montage,” or “editing” in favour of the extended long take. They believed it was a more authentic, and therefore more legitimate as a technique – for example, Michael Snow’s 1967 film *Wavelength* is comprised of one single uninterrupted zoom spanning 45 minutes.

The home movie and amateur film have strong historical links to the cinema of the avant-garde, the experimental art film, and the emergence of an independent film movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Many were inspired by the feminist movement, the civil rights movement, and the anti-war movement. The home movie and the amateur film assert the politics of “self-defense by one group against the larger society” (Poggioli, 1968, p. 31). The home movie has been referred to as the “map of human fate” (Forgas, 2008, p. 49), the celebration of past moments, the

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recollection of the dearly departed, and “the fragments of planned and random acts of living caught on film” (Forgas, 2008, p.52) - the home movie represents a body of important repressed knowledge.

The home movie and amateur film represent a body of important repressed knowledge, defined as “cinema (or) films without an interest in profit” (Trujillo, 2008, p. 57), the genre of the home movie has its beginnings with the expansion of film making technology designated for the home movie market of the 1920s. Home movies almost immediately assume a role parallel to the official commercial cinema. They are often perceived as irrelevant due to their non-commercial and non-professional status. Home movies instinctively chart the forms of every day life – family picnics, the walk in the country, the vacation at the beach. The authenticity of home movies is reflected in the discourse of private histories and private lives - the fragmentary traces of a history from below - that challenge the structured grand narratives of Hollywood by chronicling the ephemerality of daily life.

In making *The Indices of Time* and *NOSTALGIA: MOTHER AND FATHER FROM ANOTHER TIME*, I attempted to realize a series of conceptual modifications that could only be described as nostalgic in scope and application. I wanted to integrate the nostalgic attitude of re-possession (the structured retrieval of past events) with a

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series of structuralist filmmaking conventions (particular approaches to editing, duration of shots, choice of subject matter) and the home movies' chronicling of the ephemerality of daily life. This was to demonstrate how Lowenthal's theory of memory, history, and relics becomes woven into the framework of cultural significations that may affect one's personal identity and collective history. In this sense nostalgia moves beyond a wistful remembrance of things past to the full realization of what Sean Scanlan has referred to as a method of positively reframing the meaning of things from the past, and which I have incorporated in this chapter under the heading of "re-possession." I include this quote from Sean Scanlan's essay *Introduction: Nostalgia* because I think it most accurately mirrors the range of concepts I have attempted to articulate in relation to nostalgia's role in negotiating a positively liberated present.

"And even those modernist artists and critics, those make-it-new avant-gardists were nostalgic. They were nostalgic for a tradition and an individual talent, they wished for social relations and architectural structures that were as simple as they were during feudalism—they wanted feudalism without the plague and the serfdom. Theirs was nostalgia for a time before power corrupted art, a longing for a time and place that never existed. They wished for antiseptic designs and images that avoided representations of the recent past, yet harkened back to the Greeks. They wanted Athens minus the slavery" (Scanlan, 2004, p. 3).

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And finally in a leap which offers an example of nostalgia for the future, I will explain why I present my work within the digital skin of website.

### The Internet Rationale — [www.etannales.com](http://www.etannales.com)

My project, *The Skin of Nostalgia*, is an attempt to chronicle a range of habits, processes, routes, and perhaps even symptoms of a particular disposition toward myself, my memories, my history, and the artifacts (or ‘relics’ as David Lowenthal has called these objects) that surround me. This rationale is a kind of Internet manifesto, a document that tries to explain why I wish to place my work online. To begin with, I must admit that I am both excited and ambivalent by this prospect. To post a website is to join in the throng, to identify with the many, to say yes to conformity, which after all is one of the most compelling of all social tendencies; just as it is to try and stand apart and identify with the opposite spirit of individuation. The Internet involves both social interconnectivity and breakaway commercial exploitation. It is ultimately very difficult to decide which pull is the greater, being able to alert one’s friends that they may visit your website (the grand act of your compliance and sublimation), or, whether it is wiser to retain your distance and acknowledge one’s position in the ranks of those who do not wish to have voice,

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even a little voice that only a few will ever hear.

The term, “*etannales*,” Latin for “*I chronicle*,” is the title I have chosen for my website. It is a way of formally identifying a series of cultural and social practices concerned with how we account for our lives, find meaning, organizing what we know and remember, and how we locate these within the conventions of every day life. Annals and chronicles are modes of recording, representing, and expressing certain distinct features. For instance, documents chronicling the occurrence of events from year (*annus*, *Latin for year*) to year, while generally speaking annals are records without topics, or a point of view, in a sense they are happenings without a moral basis. The latter, chronicles, attends to events on a larger scale, years, lifetimes, and in some cases it may be epochal, such as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (9<sup>th</sup> century), which records events in the history of Britain dating back to 60 BC and up to the Norman Conquest. Generally speaking, annals and chronicles, unlike literary narratives do not have a central subject or a recognizable sequence of events that leads to an end. The end represents a set of “intentions, choices, and actions referred to in the descriptions of the events themselves” (Mink, 1981, p.782). But while lacking these formal narrativizing devices, annals and chronicles do offer up a kind of sublime open-endedness, a reflection of the world without the imposition of a moral

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authority, life is not a well-made story in which the world speaks for itself. Life is instead a reality we have endowed with meaning – including a moral expectation that it have a beginning, middle, and end.

### Conclusion

#### The Skin of Nostalgia

The goal of this project has been to understand why we feel an unresolved sense of loss and mourning about the past. In the Western tradition this feeling has become known as nostalgia, and has been defined by a set of rhetorical metaphors: The Golden Age, The Fall, the Homecoming, and the evocation of the Pastoral. Raymond Williams has said these “perceptions” and “values” are “most clearly articulated in particular artistic forms and conventions” (Williams, 1973, p.35). The picture postcard, the home movie, and the art film are iconic art forms that have played a significant role in shaping the trajectory of cultural discourse in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nostalgia is commensurable with the technological development of photography and the motion picture film. When think of the past, we inevitably think of images. These images may be of recent events, or more distant ones, but more likely than not, they have been captured in the form of photographs and films.



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Our personal memories would be nothing but vague remembrances across the proximal membrane of our cerebellum were it not for the photograph or the film. I personally cannot conjure up my own past without the inclusion of a photograph that chronicles that specific period, time, or place – each photograph forms an interminable link in the chain of associative characteristics that shape our identity. For instance, when I look at photographs from when I was four, five, and six years old, I clearly see what were my parent's future dreams with respect to their children and to themselves. My brother and I are never to the side of my parents; we always stand in front of them. In the refugee camps we wear fancy suits with bow ties. Our hair is combed, our shoes shinning. Later when we are seven, eight, nine, and ten, we are pictured with our new bicycles. These photographs commemorate the material achievements of our parents in the times of hardship, in foreign lands and unfamiliar places. When I look at these photographs now, I gloss over the unpleasant realities and see only the acts of sacrifice, bravery, and hope. How could we not mourn the passage of these moments?

*The Nostalgia Postcards, The Indices of Time, and Nostalgia: Mother and Father from another Time*, represent my efforts to capture, or perhaps memorialize a series of occurrences before they have become irrevocably lost. David Lowenthal writes about

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our distaste of age, about our aversion to age, and about the decay of the world, but I am drawn to the words of Walter Benjamin, who likened the ‘rubble of antiquity’ that is our history, “as (not) a process of eternal life, but rather as one of unstoppable decline” (Benjamin, 1928, p.180). He likens the “allegorical physiognomy” of history to that of a ruin, an aesthetic first made picturesque by “Renaissance artists who displace the birth and adoration of Christ from the medieval stable into the ruins of an antique temple” (Benjamin, 1928, p. 180). I think the strands of Svetlana Boym’s restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia can also be reflected here, faced with the threat of decay, I scurry to rebuild, faced with the prospect of immanent demise, I want to linger with the loss.

My nostalgia, is not exactly classical. In such instances the present is seen as deficient, lacking, or worse, empty and corrupted, while the imagined past is imbued with plenitude, stability, and idealized as comfortably intact and accessible. Nor is my nostalgia absolutely post-modern either – post-modern nostalgia has a much more immediate tendency, post-modern nostalgia is anticipatory, pre-emptive (distressed furniture, pre-washed jeans). Today nostalgia increasingly plays out against the backdrop of the consumer market place, Andrew Higson, writing on the emergence and proliferation of nostalgia websites, observes that sites like “80snostalgia.com, nostalgia.com, NostalgiaCentral.com, and Nostalgia-

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uk.com”(Higson, 2014, p. 127) advertise themselves as “your portal to the past.” The wistful longing for an irrecoverable distant past is no longer the case. Nostalgia in the popular culture of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is imminently marketable:

“Nostalgic longing was defined by loss of the original object of desire, and by its spatial and temporal displacement. The global entertainment industry of nostalgia [however] is characterized by an excess and complete availability of desirable souvenirs . . . in the West objects of the past are everywhere for sale. The past eagerly cohabits with the present” (Boym, 2001, p.53 ).

What the present commentators on nostalgia make abundantly clear is that our understanding of it has changed. Once a medical condition first observed among 17<sup>th</sup> century mercerizes dislocated from their traditional homes it was transformed in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries into the simple remembrance of by-gone days. In its latest iteration, it has become a consumer product that takes “delight in possessing a past that is no longer irrecoverable” (Higson, 2014, p. 120).

My nostalgia rests in some middle ground between the classic modern version of nostalgia expressed by Williams, Davis, and Lowenthal, and the new post-modern version articulated by Boym and Higson. For me nostalgia is not so much something I choose (ready-to-wear from the rack). It is rather like a second skin, a meditation, an all engulfing method, a film that spreads out across the landscape of the past, a fragment (ary) virtual reality, an indeterminate expression of a multiplicity of

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possibilities. Thus to speak about the skin of nostalgia is to imply what was, is, or may be, in the sense of a physical remnant, a covering, a membrane, the vestige – it is the evidence of a “form” or “cultural series” (forms of signification, cultural practices). The skin of nostalgia (metaphorically speaking) is a meditation on knowing as the ground for the transmission of both experience and meaning. Therefore to speak of the skin of nostalgia is to speak of the surface upon which is imprinted the “life story.” Every day life, Jurgen Habermas has observed is an encounter with “structured reality” – there are beginnings, there are special places, there are real worlds, there are subjective ‘agents’ (ourselves), there is the grammar of objective motives (performance and calculation), and then, there is most certainly ‘stative’ finality (death). I believe nostalgia is at its core an organic psychic response to the ephemerality of human existence and the impermanence of all reality. The fear that what I am, have been, might be in the future, does not mean anything, and so we are compelled to try and fix it some how, to preserve it, to memorialize it, to sanctify it, and ultimately, to try and change it.

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